

PBS MACNEIL-LEHRER REPORT  
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MACNEIL: A Soviet fighter shoots down a Korean airline, apparently killing 269 people, including Americans.

MACNEIL: Good evening. The United States today accused the Soviet Union of shooting down a Korean Airlines jumbo jet carrying 269 people. Those on board included Democratic Congressman Lawrence McDonald of Georgia and, according to Korean Airlines, as many as 30 other Americans. There were no reports of survivors. Korean Airline Flight 007 was on its way from New York to Seoul, Korea, with a stop at Anchorage, Alaska. According to the U.S. government, it was tracked by Soviet jet fighters and shot down by a missile fired from an SU-15 over the Soviet island of Sakhalin. The Soviet news agency Tass said only that Soviet fighters intercepted an unidentified plane that intruded over Sakhalin but it did not respond to signals and continued towards the Sea of Japan. Moscow did not acknowledge shooting down the airliner. Tonight, the reaction and the implications. Jim?

LEHRER: Robin, because of the airliner tragedy, President Reagan will cut short his California vacation, returning to Washington on Saturday to meet with top national security advisers on the airliner tragedy, as well as the situation in Lebanon, where he today also ordered an additional amphibious force to go. Earlier today, White House press spokesman Larry Speakes spoke for the president about the airliner incident. Speakes, saying there are no circumstances which could justify the attack on the plane. 'The Soviet Union owes an explanation to the world about how and why this tragedy occurred,' he said. Here in Washington, Secretary of State George Shultz spoke for himself at a morning news conference. GEORGE SHULTZ (Secretary of State): At approximately 16:00 hours Greenwich Mean Time, the aircraft came to the attention of Soviet radar. It was tracked constantly by the Soviets from that time. The aircraft strayed into Soviet air space over the Kamchatka peninsula and over the Sea of Okhotsk and over the Sakhalin Island. The Soviets tracked the commercial airliner for some two and one-half hours. A Soviet pilot reported visual contact with the aircraft at 18:12 hours. At 18:21 hours, the Korean aircraft was reported by the Soviet pilot at 10,000 meters. At 18:26 hours, the Soviet pilot reported that he fired a missile and the target was destroyed. At 18:30 hours, the Korean aircraft was reported by radar at 5,000 meters. At 18:38 hours, the Korean plane disappeared from the radar screens. We know that at least eight Soviet fighters reacted at one time or another to the airliner. The pilot who shot the aircraft down reported after the attack that he had in fact fired a missile, that he had destroyed the target, and that he was breaking away. About an hour later, Soviet controllers ordered a number of their search aircraft to conduct search and rescue activity in the vicinity of the last position of the Korean airline reflected by Soviet tracking. One of these aircraft reported finding kerosene on the surface of the seas in that area. During Wednesday night, the United States State Department officials, particularly assistant secretary Burt, were in contact with Soviet officials seeking information concerning the airliner's fate. The Soviets offered no information. The United States reacts with revulsion to this attack. Loss of life appears to be heavy. We can see no excuse whatsoever for this appalling act. We have no explanation to offer. We can see no explanation whatever for shooting down an unarmed commercial airliner, no matter whether it's in your air space or not.

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LEHRER: As the secretary said, the State Department official specifically assigned to get an explanation from the Soviets is Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt. He did speak twice today with Soviet officials here in Washington. Mr. Secretary, what have the Soviets said to you? BURT: Well, Jim, the Soviets have said to us privately essentially what they have said publicly in a Tass release. And that is that the airliner did enter their air space, that they dispatched fighter planes to follow that aircraft. They say that it went through over their air space and was headed towards the Sea of Japan and left their air space. They do not acknowledge or admit the fact that they engaged the aircraft and shot it down.

LEHRER: Have you specifically, has the United States specifically said, 'Soviet Union, we know you shot down that plane.' BURT: Yes, we have.

LEHRER: And what do they say? BURT: They obviously deny it. They have given us a statement that they followed that aircraft. But they say that they stopped tracking the aircraft when it left their air space.

LEHRER: Both you.... BURT: They have said that they have mounted a search and air rescue mission to search for that aircraft in the Sea of Japan.

LEHRER: Secretary Shultz, and now you, speak with great certainty about what happened. How are you able to do that? BURT: We're able to do it on the basis of information that we have obtained and other countries have obtained about the events that occurred last night.

LEHRER: If this things continues to escalate and the Soviet Union continues to deny having shot this plane down, is the United States prepared to publicly prove what you all say? BURT: We told the Soviet Union today that their statement and what they have told us privately was totally inadequate. And we have reiterated our request for a satisfactory explanation of the episode. And we will continue to press the Soviet Union for a satisfactory explanation. Secretary of State Shultz said today that when he goes to Madrid next week and meets with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko that he will ask for an explanation.

LEHRER: But if that explanation doesn't come, is the United States, can the United States publicly prove that the Soviet Union shot that plane down? BURT: I am satisfied that we can prove it.

LEHRER: And.... BURT: And it is not, I should, I should say that it is not only the United States that is....

LEHRER: Sure. BURT: ...stating that that aircraft was shot down. The Japanese have said so. The Korean government has said so. And as I say, our information is not simply based on our own sources.

LEHRER: And there's not a shadow of a doubt in your mind about it? BURT: We are completely satisfied that that aircraft was engaged by Soviet fighter planes, that, ah, as Secretary Shultz said in the filmclip that he was, that that pilot was clearly under the control and in continuous contact of ground authorities and that he fired his missile and destroyed that aircraft.

LEHRER: The Soviet, Soviet embassy person told one of our reporters this afternoon that this Korean plane did not have navigational lights on and also hinted, if that's the word, indicated, use all the phony journalistic terms, and anyhow was suggesting

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that on a radar screen an AWACS reconnaissance plane or AWACS communications plane looks similar to a 747 and that may have been what happened. BURT: Jim, the Soviet Union was in contact with that Korean airliner for two and a half hours as it dipped in and out of Soviet air space. They dispatched fighters. And as we have said before, at least one of those fighters was in visual contact with that aircraft. In fact, we know that, that that fighter went very close to the aircraft, flew up one side of the aircraft, flew down the other side of the aircraft and then engaged the aircraft and attacked it. And it is very clear to us that when that attack order was given that the pilot of that aircraft knew that he was striking a commercial airliner.

LEHRER: No question about that? BURT: It's simply you can't, you, how can you, how could a pilot misjudge an AWACS, with its very special configuration and with a radardome, from a jumbojet, a 747?

LEHRER: Thank you. Robin? BURT: Jim....

LEHRER: Yes. BURT: ...I might add one point.

LEHRER: Right. BURT: The fact that it was a military aircraft and if the Soviets had attacked a military aircraft, that is also a terribly alarming, would be a terribly alarming factor. For there are, there are standard international rules and norms for engaging both civilian and military aircraft over one's own territory.

LEHRER: Uh huh. BURT: The Soviet Union has flown its own civilian aircraft over the United States on several occasions, breaking rules, established rules. And we've never even come close to attacking that aircraft with our military aircraft.

LEHRER: Thank you. Robin?

MACNEIL: One explanation of what may lie behind the Soviet action came from former ambassador to Moscow, Malcolm Toon. We spoke to him this afternoon in Washington.

MALCOLM TOON: It is true that there are a lot of sensitive installations in, in that part of the Soviet Union, and they have for years been very sensitive about any penetration of that area, whether it's by an aircraft or by foreigners traveling. For example, that whole area was banned completely to me when I was ambassador in Moscow. So, there is something there, ah, that the Soviets are very sensitive about. But again, I, I repeat that even if you have highly sensitive installations in that part of the country and even if there was an unintended penetration of that area, that does not justify this sort of action by the Soviet Union.

LEHRER: We look now at what the Soviet decision-making process may have been in this incident with General George Keegan, former head of the U.S. Air Force Intelligence. Since retirement, he's served as editor of the magazine, Strategic Review, and founded the organization Peace Through Strength Coalition. General, could this have been the result of an over-zealous pilot or low-level officer on the ground? KEEGAN: No, I think that's hardly likely. The Soviet air defense system, in addition to being the world's largest, is certainly highly disciplined. The lines of command are thoroughly established, as are the lines of authority. And as the secretary has said, back in 1944 a large group of nations, including the Soviet Union, agreed upon the rules that would involve penetration of foreign air space by other aircraft and agreed upon how civil aircraft would be treated, identified, ordered to land, and, and rules also apply to military aircraft. Now, those are clearly established in international law agreements.

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LEHRER: All right. Briefly, what are the rules, I mean, when would, what would have had to have happened for the Soviet Union to have been justified, under the rules, for the Soviet Union to have been justified in shooting down that airplane? KEEGAN: I see no justification whatever. But under Soviet law, which is established very clearly, quite precisely, any foreign aircraft that intrudes over Soviet air space is susceptible to being intercepted and shot down. The rules are that Soviet interceptors are to identify. They are to fly in front of, and if they cannot communicate electronically are to move their wings laterally in such a way to signify to the pilot that he is to land by following that fighter. If he fails to do so, the fighter is then to circle to the left and fire a warning shot or series of shots off the bow but is not to fire at the aircraft. And if at that point the aircraft refuses to land or does not acknowledge, be it a military or a civil aircraft, then under Soviet law, the Soviets are authorized, have authorized themselves to fire upon such aircraft. Those rules are clear. They're well understood, certainly by the United States and by the Soviets.

LEHRER: What about by the Koreans? KEEGAN: And understood by the Koreans. However, the Koreans have been very careless traditionally. And I suspect if we're ever allowed to investigate this case there may be some analogy between the case of 1978, in which they flew one of their airlines a thousand miles off course.

LEHRER: But let me, let me, let me ask you this. Just to put the question to you bluntly, do you believe that this could have happened under any circumstances other than a decision being made in the highest levels at the Kremlin to shoot that airplane down? KEEGAN: I think that's the only way that that decision could have been made, because in the command system, in all of the cases that I've had experience with, which number in many, many dozens in the last 30 years....

LEHRER: Of planes going into somebody else's air space? KEEGAN: That's correct. To my knowledge, the regional air defense, local air defense have almost invariably received their final destruct order, the command from Moscow. Now, there are provisions that we're at the, say, wing level, acting under the rules clearly established, that a wing of fighters goes up, intercepts, identifies, challenges, orders to land and the foreign intruder fails to obey or comply. Then, the rules authorize that wing commander to destroy that aircraft. Nevertheless, the Soviet system invariably checks up the chain of command all the way to Moscow and can do so within two or three elapsed minutes of time.

LEHRER: So in two and a half hours they'd have plenty of time. KEEGAN: Yes.

LEHRER: Thank you. Robin?

MACNEIL: For more on what the Soviet motivation and action may have been we turn to Donald Zagoria, an expert on Soviet foreign policy. He's a professor of government at Hunter College, the City University of New York, and author of the recent book 'Soviet Policy in East Asia.' Mr. Zagoria, what kind of explanation do you find plausible in this case? You've heard what the others have said. DONALD ZIAGORIA (Hunter College): Well, Robert, I don't find any plausible explanation so far. I don't think anyone has advanced one. Uh, it's difficult to believe it was an accident, because as Secretary Burg indicated, uh, it's hard to see how the Soviet plane making visual contact with this Korean airliner could have mistaken it for some kind of spy plane. Uh, it's also hard to see, for me at least, how it might've been a deliberate decision at the highest level of the Soviet leadership, because at a time when the Soviets are clearly interested in making progress in improving relations with the United States, uh, in a

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situation where, uh, this new leadership, uh, uh, is bound to be aware of the enormous world outrage that this would produce, uh, it's hard to see, uh, that being a deliberate, uh, act.

MACNEIL: What about the sensitivity of whatever is in the Kamchatka peninsula or this island where the plane was apparently shot down? I mean, what would be there that would make them so paranoid? ZAGORIA: Well, I agree with Ambassador Toon that it's a very, uh, that whole, uh, Kamchatka, Sea of Okhotsk, Sakhalin area is a very, uh, sensitive region, uh, and the Soviets do have a degree of paranoia about penetration of their borders. But, uh, none of that still makes any, any sense in describing, uh, uh, motivation.

MACNEIL: You, you heard what General Keegan said about the understanding which the Soviets had on their own and what had been adopted years ago, uh, internationally. Is there anything in the kind of cold, cold war behavior between the superpowers which might have justified this action in the Soviet Union? Given the extreme sensitivity of that part of their country militarily? ZAGORIA: No, I, uh, I don't, uh, see anything that could've justified this action even in their own minds because as I say, they've invested a fair amount of effort, particularly in the past year or so, in trying to, uh, rekindle the small thaw in Soviet-American relations. Uh, and, uh, to, uh, if they wanted to get tough with the United States or with the West, they could pick, uh, 50 other ways to do it other than shooting down an unarmed Korean plane. So it's something that just doesn't make any sense to me.

MACNEIL: Thank you. Jim?

LEHRER: Our final guest is here in two capacities, as a member of Congress and as a friend of Congressman Larry McDonald, who was aboard that Korean airliner. He's Congressman Newton Gingrich, Republican of Georgia, whose district is next to Congressman McDonald's, in the Atlanta suburbs. He's with us tonight from the studios of Georgia Public Television in Atlanta. This afternoon, Congressman, you wrote a letter to President Reagan demanding that the United States make some specific demands of the Soviet Union. Briefly, what are they? NEWT GINGRICH (R-Ga.): Jim, they're designed to give us a chance to look at Mr. Zagoria's question of 'why?', and they say first, the Soviets should publicly identify and publish, punish, the officials responsible for these murders. Second, they should apologize to every nation which had citizens aboard the airplane which was shot down. Third, they should pay compensation for both the loss and personal tragedy to each family whose loved one was murdered by officials of the Soviet Union. And finally, they should issue public orders to the Soviet armed forces that in future incidents, airliners which might get into Soviet air space would be brought down without any kind of military action and investigated, but would not be shot down.

LEHRER: Congressman, up to this point, as we heard Secretary Burt say, the Soviets aren't even admitting that they shot the plane down. What if they do not respond, they do not admit it, and they do not do what you want them to do? What then? What should the United States do? GINGRICH: Jim, I think the most important action for all Americans is within ourselves, not with the Soviets. We seem to be surprised again by the brutality, by the savagery of the nation which, uh, shot, uh, down this aircraft, killed 269 people, which earlier had forced down a Korean aircraft in '78, which invaded Afghanistan, has used chemical warfare. I guess, you know, Larry McDonald, of all the congressmen, probably had the strongest perception that the Soviet Union was a clear threat to freedom everywhere, that it was a brutal nation that would kill people as it killed them yesterday. And I think the first step for us

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is to begin to be honest about the nature of the dictatorship that we're dealing with, and to quit, uh, kidding ourselves about the conditions out there, and to quit trying to appease a nation uh, which is clearly a threat to civilization. Now, that doesn't mean we have to go to war. It doesn't mean we have to cut off relations. But it does mean that we as a nation ought to quit being surprised at a dictatorship which is callously willing to murder 269 people and then lie to the world, even when it knows that the United States and Japan and Korea have tapes of its pilots having killed those 269 people.

LEHRER: There were suggestions from some of your colleagues today in the Congress that we ought to kill the wheat deal that was just signed last week by Secretary Block in Moscow, that we should stop or do something in arms control, the arms control talks that are start, that are due to begin in another few days in Geneva. Do you have something specific in mind like that? GINGRICH: I think as a minimum first step, uh, frankly, that the, uh, secretary of state should cancel the meeting with Gromyko.

LEHRER: That's on September 8. GINGRICH: That's on September 8. Uh, candidly, I'm, Gromyko, when he was foreign minister, lied to John F. Kennedy about the missiles in Cuba. His government is now lying to the world about this incident. And I think that we should say that until there is a clear and a firm and an open statement by the Soviet Union, that we ought to reserve the right to, uh, re-examine all of our relations with the Soviet Union, including their embassy and the number of diplomats they have in this country, their right to land aircraft in the United States, and a variety of things. But I think that we should not do anything precipitously. We don't need grand symbols, we don't need big gestures. We need a firm, quiet, steady, systematic resolution that if the Soviet Union is determined to be a brutal dictatorship that free people can learn how to, uh, preserve that freedom systematically by increasing the pressure on the Russians without punishing ourselves.

LEHRER: Thank you.